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### [Scripture for Life](#)



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In the 17th century, the Jesuit missionary Jean Pierre Médaille published a book called *Maxims of Perfection for Souls Aspiring to Great Virtue*. In the tradition of Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life*, it was compiled for lay people who wanted to deepen their relationship with God and carry on Christ's mission in the world. Médaille's seventh maxim enjoins disciples to "embrace in desire the salvation and perfection of a whole world" such that they would be ready to "do everything, to suffer everything ... for the advancement of the glory of God and the salvation of the dear neighbor." That's pretty much the mission Jesus gave the disciples in today's Gospel. But Jesus knew that such discipleship always involves a process so intense that he told Nicodemus that it was no easier than being born again.

John the Evangelist knew how to set a dramatic scene or two to present this process in all its joy and pain. He tells us that on the first day of the week, the first day of the new creation, as the disciples were gathered behind closed doors in the evening, Jesus burst through their darkness and fear and allowed them to perceive him in their midst. Reminding them of what he had promised the last time they were together, he greeted them with the simple words, "Peace be with you." He didn't say, "I knew you'd scatter like frightened sheep." He didn't even mention what he had suffered or their loss of hope. Instead, as he blessed them with peace, he invited them to look at the scars left by what he had been through — the visible signs of death made impotent.

In what may be the greatest understatement in his Gospel, John simply says, "The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." That rejoicing had to be a complex mixture of utter confusion, guilty embarrassment, humbling relief and grace-filled peace. The risen Jesus who presumably could have appeared to them under any guise, identified himself to them by showing the marks of his suffering. More than any words could ever do, his appearance made them realize that his passion was indeed his glory and a promise for all humankind. Jesus' first greeting of peace told them both that they were forgiven and that they had nothing to fear from the powers of the world.

Jesus' second greeting of peace took the disciples in a new direction. Their original encounter with their risen Lord had brought them forgiveness and new life; the next step was for them to take up his mission. John describes the mission of the entire church in the command of Jesus to disciples: Forgive sins.

The Greek word John used for forgiveness can also mean to send something away or leave something behind. In essence, forgiveness is the gift of freedom par excellence because it releases a person from the limitations or definitions of the past. It is the offer of new birth, a transformed life.

One week later, the third time Jesus greets the disciples with peace, he addresses the one disciple who had not seen him and could not believe that such suffering and rejection as Jesus had undergone could be overcome. Thomas' statement, "Unless I see the marks ..." implies that he was seeking a deeper faith than his friends had been able to convey to him. John names Thomas "Didymus," the twin, implying that he is the reflection, the twin, of all the disciples who were not in that upper room on the first night of the first week. Thomas wants to be convinced. He knows what he believes from having experienced Jesus' death in his own way, he knows what he believes about suffering and death, but there is enough of a crack in his certainty to say "If I see the marks ..."

When Jesus appeared to Thomas as his wounded-risen self, he captured Thomas in the dynamic of mercy and reconciliation. Thomas finally understood the God of unwavering love and life. When Thomas said "My Lord and my God!" he proclaimed his faith in everything Jesus had taught about God as his Father.

In this ending of the Gospel, Jesus' last words are "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." The only other "blessed" in John's Gospel are those who have learned to participate in the washing of feet (13:17). Jesus invites all future believers into a life of being forgiven and forgiving. That is the life of perfection.

People who desire growth cannot avoid some failures. The secret and grace of Christianity is that the merciful Christ meets us in the very midst of our failures and fears, offers us peace, and sends us to do everything possible to share that peace with the whole world.

## **ACTS 4:32-35**

This passage follows one in which the Holy Spirit came to the community that had gathered together in prayer to ask God for the strength to be bold in their proclamation of the faith (Acts 4:23-31). It is no accident that Luke, the evangelist most attentive to relationships between the wealthy and the impoverished, followed that prayer for courageous faith with a description of the community's practice of sharing. Luke was making the point that the community demonstrated their faith by their way of life.

We could well read this passage as a fulfillment of various prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures. While the idea of being of one heart and mind reflected the Greek ideal of friendship among equals, the Christian community was diverse in background and economic status. Looking for roots in the Hebrew Scriptures, we realize that being of one heart and mind recalls the wording of Deuteronomy 10:12 which calls people to love God with their whole heart and being — creating them as a people through their attachment to God. The unity of the community also reflects Jeremiah 32:39 in which God promises to give the people one heart.

Verse 33 which speaks of the apostles' witness to the Resurrection can be understood as a further explanation of the community's lifestyle: They gave testimony to the Resurrection by the way they cared for one another. This means that their awareness of the Resurrection so transformed their understanding of daily life, their relationships, and their freely-assumed mutual obligations that the well-being of each member of the community became more important than personal property. This fulfilled Deuteronomy 15:4 which declared that "the Lord, your God, will bless you abundantly in the land ... there should be no one of you in need."

The sharing of goods Luke described in this community was not a socialist system or the original model for religious communities with their vow of poverty and common ownership of everything. This passage does not say that everyone put everything in common as did the Qumran community, but rather, some gave what they had to the apostles to provide for those in need. Luke does not portray this as a requirement for community membership — even if the example of the generous would have put significant pressure on those who were reluctant to follow their example. The emphasis is not on what was given but rather on the fact that no one was in need.

## **PSALMS 118 2-4, 13-15, 22-24**

The underlying theme of this psalm is the steadfast love of the Lord — God's "mercy" is the translation in our Lectionary. Historically, this psalm may reflect David's relief at the death of King Saul. For people of all times, the key to this psalm is the refrain repeated in our first strophe: "His mercy endures forever." That sentiment can also be translated to proclaim that God's steadfast love lasts forever. God's mercy is not an emotion as much as a way of acting that expresses God's character. We learn about divine mercy in the Exodus and every other action through which God saves

the people. Appropriately, the psalm opens with the call to proclaim God's everlasting goodness.

In his book, *Tehillim: Psalms*, a new translation with a commentary anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic sources, Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer suggests that the succeeding calls to the house of Israel, the house of Aaron, and those who fear the Lord are seen by some Jewish scholars as evidence of David's prayer of thanks. In that context, the house of Israel (the entire people saved from Saul), the house of Aaron (the priestly class who had suffered particularly under Saul), and "those who fear the Lord," rejoice because of the peace and prosperity David will bring.

The second strophe of today's psalm response recalls the details of David's rescue from Saul. This takes the psalm out of the realm of theoretical praise into concrete historical experience. The psalmist recalls that his moment of disaster was exactly the moment when God gave him the strength he needed for victory. This is a faithful rendition of a common theme: God raises up the lowly and even in the midst of the conflict, the faithful can anticipate the joyful shouts of victory.

The final strophe is the one that became a favorite of the early Christian community as they tried to explain the mystery of the crucified and risen Christ. Originally the stone which the builders rejected referred to Israel herself, the tiny nation that would become the city on a hilltop to which all the nations would stream. In Christianity, Christ is that stone, a stumbling block for many and rejected by his own. The grand finale of the psalm is the recognition of victory, the exaltation of the one who was rejected. The entire psalm proclaims that the only reason for rejoicing comes from God. The day of victory, the day of salvation — whenever and wherever it happens — is the day the Lord has made and all we need do is rejoice in it — and that rejoicing will permeate everything we think and say and do.

## **1 JOHN 5:1-6**

The First Letter of John deals with three interrelated dimensions of believers' relationship with God: obedience, love and faith. All three play into the selection heard on the Second Sunday of Easter. The reading begins focusing on belief, claiming that everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten by God. We should not allow that statement to pass without considering its implications.

Two of the rich dimensions of that statement come from its notion of faith and the idea that the believer is begotten of God. This letter conceives of faith as an ongoing activity, a process of growth rather than the simple acceptance of a creed or dogma. Saying that belief demonstrates that a person is begotten by God indicates that the belief itself is a grace. People do not come to faith on their own but by virtue of collaboration with God's love active within them. Belief involves the total person. While it has an intellectual dimension because it needs to be articulated, it is also affective and effective: Belief implies a relationship of love that expresses itself in concrete behaviors.

The opening statement of our reading indicates that belief is a result of being begotten by God; God's love has come upon the people of faith in such a way as to give them a new birth. This notion of faith as a new birth means that everything about their perspective changes. Once people have experienced "being begotten" by God, every other dimension of their life takes its meaning from that experience. That is why the author goes on to say that the person who is begotten by God conquers the world. Such people cannot be coerced or seduced by the world; nothing has value except in the light of their relationship with God.

The change that happens with being begotten by God is both decisive and ongoing. We cannot conceive of faith or being begotten by God as a once-for-all event. Because we are human beings living in time, our faith and love and obedience continually affect every dimension of our lives and grow for as long as we live.

## **JOHN 20:19-31**

This is Divine Mercy Sunday, a feast established by Pope St. John Paul II to celebrate the merciful love of God that has been revealed most completely through Jesus. The church has chosen to use the same Gospel on this Sunday in each year of the liturgical cycle, a sure sign that it has something vital to tell us about what we are celebrating.

One of the first things we might notice is that this Gospel passage seems rather repetitious. It includes two very similar appearances of the risen Lord, and Jesus' theme song is "Peace be with you," a phrase he uses twice in the first story and again in the second. Additionally, both times that Jesus appeared among the disciples, they thought they were in a well-

locked room. Jesus twice made a point of showing them the scars of his passion.

Beginning with the first story, John takes care to let us know that it was still the first day of the new creation, even though evening had come and the doors were locked: Both details are signs of the fact that the disciples were still in the dark. When John tells us that Jesus stood in their midst, he is indicating that Jesus became present among them, startling them by breaking through the barriers of their fear and confusion, obstacles that were actually more formidable than locked doors. At that point, the risen Lord needed to say nothing more than “Peace be with you.”

As John tells us this story, he is careful to point out that it was the wounded-risen Christ who appeared in the midst of the frightened disciples to offer them peace. Peace was the gift he had promised at the Last Supper, but it had a much deeper meaning as the disciples faced the crucified and risen Christ, the very person they had abandoned and denied. Jesus’ offer of peace was a profound expression of mercy, the love that nothing can overcome.

In his message on this feast in 2014, Pope Francis indicated that as Jesus showed the disciples his wounds he was calling all disciples to abandon their fear of confronting the wounds of the world, trusting that the love of God is more powerful than evil and all the woundedness of history. Speaking of the recently canonized popes, Sts. John XXIII and John Paul II, Francis reminded all Christians that only by facing our fear of suffering and struggle can we come to know the joy which the risen Christ wishes to bestow on us. John would add that only when we allow the risen Christ to face us in our weakness and guilt can we hear his offer of peace.

The second time Jesus blessed the disciples with peace he added their mission to it. This is the first commissioning of the disciples in John’s Gospel. It is as if John says that until the disciples had been through the entire process of being with Jesus, abandoning him, suffering the pain of his death, and being received back with mercy, they were not ready to carry on his mission.

On this Divine Mercy Sunday, our readings remind us that God’s mercy is God’s steadfast love. This love permeates the being and life of anyone who is open to it and impels them into the mission of sharing it with the world. Those who get caught up in this dynamic, those who meet the love of the risen Christ in the midst of their fear or shame, understand what it means to sing, “This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad.”

## **Planning: 2nd Sunday of Easter**

**By: Lawrence Mick**

Nicknames can be cute or they can be cruel. They can be temporary or they may last a lifetime. St. Thomas got a nickname that has stuck for a couple millennia already: “Doubting Thomas.” It comes from today’s Gospel, of course, even though that same passage contains one of the most explicit confessions of faith found in the Gospels: “My Lord and my God!”

The nickname may not be fair to Thomas, but it’s helpful to us. We all have doubts at times, and it helps to know we are in good company with Thomas. This Gospel serves as a reminder to all of us, and perhaps especially to the newly baptized that doubts will come but they do not destroy faith if we remain open to God.

In a similar way, the promise of forgiveness in today’s Gospel reminds us that sin does not disappear completely from our lives when we are baptized. We continue to need deeper conversion to Christ, but we are reassured by the constant offer of forgiveness.

Ever since Pope John Paul II gave this Sunday the nickname of Divine Mercy Sunday, there’s been a bit of tension between the joy proper to Easter and the focus on sin and repentance that tends to dominate the Divine Mercy observance. Perhaps the key is to remember that we celebrate because we have been forgiven and we rejoice because God’s mercy is always available to us. This is not a good day for celebrating the sacrament of penance, but every day is a good day to rejoice in God’s mercy.

The story of Thomas can also remind us why it is important that the initiation process continue through the period of mystagogy. That period is observed intensely during the 50 days of Easter, but even after that, it is to continue (less intensely) for another year. The newly baptized, like the rest of us, have more growing to do. Mystagogy is for all of us, which is why the Order of Christian Initiation states that it takes place primarily during the Sunday Eucharist. Preachers are urged to use the homilies for these Sundays to reflect with the whole assembly on the meaning of the Easter sacraments (baptism, confirmation and Eucharist) and the implications for daily life that flow from them.

Remember that this Sunday is also the Octave Day of Easter. It should still clearly look and sound like Easter throughout the liturgy, almost as if we were still on Easter Sunday itself. One reminder of this is the double Alleluia that is to be sung at the dismissal today. You might remind the presider(s) and musicians to be prepared for that special touch that marks the joy of the season.

## **Prayers: 2nd Sunday of Easter**

By: Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

In the heart of this season of Easter rejoicing, we are reminded that faith is sometimes fragile and circuitous. If we listen carefully, we realize that Scripture relays another truth about people who struggle and need to be convinced. This is a good Sunday for those of us who have ever experienced doubt and who need to hear that God still loves and forgives us. That describes most of us.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you appeared to the disciples behind locked doors: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you gave them the power to forgive sins: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you called Thomas and all of us to believe in you: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Brothers and sisters, let us pray for both believers and those who struggle with doubt.

**Minister** For the whole church in our ongoing efforts to be a faith-filled, rejoicing people ... we pray,

- For those whose faith has been shaken by life's circumstances or who doubt their capacity to believe, especially in those areas of the world where life is precarious ... we pray,
- For those who fear that doubt is unforgiveable or who have never experienced God's great mercy ... we pray,
- For the ability to recognize the presence of God in our midst, even in times of fear ... we pray,
- For the gift of forgiveness bestowed on us by the reconciling power of Christ Jesus and made active through the healing presence of the Spirit ... we pray,
- For those who judge the faith of others, or who are impediments to faith by their words or actions ... we pray,
- For those in this community who are in need; and for those who touch and support us in our faith journey ... we pray,

**Presider** God of mercy, we are grateful that you know and love us not only in our strengths, but also in our weakest moments. Uphold us when we are doubtful, and encourage us when we are afraid. Help us to remember your unending mercy. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who calls us to believe. Amen.

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